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ABSTRACT

Based on the experiences of the Harvard Emerging Literacy Project (HELP), this booklet helps interested college students to start early childhood literacy programs. After a foreword by Education Secretary Richard W. Riley and a preface, the booklet discusses HELP and provides guidelines for starting such a project, including basic principles, taking advantage of the school's resources, training, recruiting volunteers, working with--not simply for--communities, keeping the dialogue going, and establishing a firm base from which to grow. The booklet then presents a summary of recent brain research, and discussions of the role families and communities play, children in poverty, and why young children need help. The booklet next discusses the Head Start program, the Even Start program, and the America Reads Challenge. A checklist and descriptions of 27 literacy groups, college-based programs, early childhood literacy materials, and Internet resources are attached. (RS)

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Read With Me

A Guide for Student Volunteers Starting Early Childhood Literacy Programs

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Read With Me

A Guide for Student Volunteers Starting Early Childhood Literacy Programs

Chandler Arnold

National Institute on
Early Childhood Development and Education

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September 1997

Foreword

For those of you about to venture into the realm of becoming reading tutors and reading volunteers, I wholeheartedly thank you for your efforts. Nothing has a more long lasting impact than work that helps to educate our children.

Recent advances in neuroscience research have brought to the public's attention what many have long suspected—children's learning and development from birth to kindergarten are critical to success later in life. We know that specific types of language and visual experiences build the circuitry that lays the foundation that is essential for good learning. Therefore, educators, families, and communities alike must accept the challenge of providing all young children with opportunities for early, enriching language and reading experiences.

Helping a child become a good and independent reader is a gift that will last a lifetime. That is one reason the President has made literacy a national priority. He understands, as do each of you who are now volunteering to work with children, that if children are to grow strong and compete in the 21st century, they must first be good readers.

This book was written by a recent summer intern at the U.S. Department of Education who developed a volunteer reading program at his university. Like many who engage themselves in this sort of work, he was deeply affected by his experiences and was drawn to share them with others. I know that the ideas in this booklet will be instrumental in helping other motivated college students start greatly needed community programs.

There are many gifts a child can receive, but few are as valuable as the ability to explore the world through reading. I am sure you will look back with happiness and a sense of satisfaction on the time you spent sharing the joy of reading with young children.

Richard W. Riley
Secretary of Education

Preface

As a child, my favorite part of a book was the table of contents. I remember curling up beside my grandmother in the big swing on her front porch as she described all the stories found in my favorite Richard Scarry book. After she read the titles and we looked at the pictures, I would try to guess what the story was going to be about—and I loved every minute of it. I always knew I was having a wonderful time with my grandmother; what I didn't know was that our experiences were laying the groundwork for nearly all the thinking and learning I would ever do.

Twenty years ago my grandmother had no idea about the brain research that was just beginning at colleges and universities around the country; she simply did—instinctively—what her mother and grandmother had done with her. And I am very grateful.

Like many college students in our country, I have gradually come to realize how lucky I was as a very young child—and how much students our age can do to help others who haven't been given the attention many of us were fortunate enough to receive. For these reasons, I started a grassroots volunteer group called the Harvard Emerging Literacy Project (HELP) that places weekly and biweekly undergraduate literacy volunteers in Cambridge Head Start classrooms. Our program, however, is just one example of the many ways college students can engage in this sort of work. The goal of this booklet is to help interested college students get started, and its publication was made possible by a summer internship with the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education.

At college it is so easy to get wrapped up in coursework and grades. Working with these children, however, provides a lot of perspective—often I feel as if I'm learning more from them than they're learning from me. One young girl from a Head Start classroom near campus stands out in particular. In coming to know her I quickly found that *I* was the one being educated; and slowly I learned the difficult

lessons that my four-year-old friend had been forced to deal with all too quickly. Child abuse, poverty, violence, and a host of other daunting obstacles still face my young friends and their classmates across our country. This, however, is not the aspect of the experience that stands out most in my mind. Instead, I remember these children's tremendous capacities to forgive, trust, and love.

Sometimes even college students are surprised by what they find in the table of contents. I know I have been deeply enriched by the experience I shared with these young children. It is my hope that many of you will share this joy as well.

Chandler Arnold
Harvard Emerging Literacy Project

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The Harvard Emerging Literacy Project (HELP)

How One Community Is Making a Difference

Many preschoolers love books. When young readers and volunteers spend time in the universe of books, they find themselves on special journeys through yet-undiscovered worlds filled with very hungry caterpillars, friendly dragons, and even hidden corners where the wild things are. Other young people, however, are reluctant to read—but it isn't always those hidden corners that make them uneasy.

Many of America's preschoolers aren't regularly read to on a one-on-one basis, if at all. While this is a sad fact, it also offers a wonderful opportunity to our country's volunteers. This handbook is designed for college students interested in starting public service reading programs in their communities. While specifically geared to college students working with preschool children, many of the ideas discussed can easily be applied to children of many different ages. All children benefit from the stimulation one-on-one reading provides. Children who have received little or no attention of this sort often benefit even more.

The Harvard Emerging Literacy Project (HELP), an independent undergraduate group, was founded in 1996 by an undergraduate's desire to help. The group began with just a few undergraduates volunteering to read in a single Head Start classroom once a month. From there the group has become one of the fastest-growing service organizations on campus and currently places weekly and biweekly reading volunteers in every Head Start classroom in Cambridge, with plans to expand next year.

Undergraduates involved with HELP have also gradually discovered that young children are by no means the only ones who benefit from volunteer literacy efforts. While most people understand that these preschoolers gain a great deal from this stimulation, many volunteers feel they learn as much as the children. As a result, these volunteers not only enjoy the experience of public service, but *thrive* on it.

Each volunteer's experience with these remarkable children has been different. Some speak of increased feelings of compassion, others greater sensitivity, and still others describe a heightened sense of perspective. However everyone has gained an increased appreciation for individual kindness in our often hectic society.

Growing up, no matter what your age, can be an unsettling experience. But somehow those places where the "wild things" live don't seem nearly as scary if you have a brave four-year-old beside you.

Basic Principles: How To Get Started

One of the hardest parts of setting up a literacy volunteer program is finding a group of children to help. While almost all day care centers love to have volunteers, the thought of working with an organized group of unknown volunteers makes some teachers and caregivers nervous—especially if they feel that the individual needs of their classrooms might be ignored. To avoid this problem, start slowly and plan carefully. Here are some things that worked for HELP:

- **Start with someone who knows you or your group.** If you already know a day care teacher, start by talking with that person. If he or she doesn't need any volunteers (which probably won't be the case) ask what other classrooms might like to be involved.
- **Don't overwhelm classroom teachers.** If you do pick up the phone and call a day care center out of the blue, don't try to explain all of your ideas over the phone—instead briefly explain what you're thinking about and ask if you could visit the center at a convenient time and talk in more depth. This not only gives you and the

teacher a chance to get to know each other by talking face to face, it also enables you to gain an understanding of the center's environment and the children who are there.

- **When talking with teachers be careful not to act as if you have all the answers.** Some people and organizations are reluctant to work with student volunteers because of their supposed unreliability, problems with school breaks and exams, and the perception that college students think they have all the solutions. When entering a conversation with a teacher do not be afraid to be honest—admit that you have a great deal to learn and demonstrate that your interest is sincere. By doing these things, HELP volunteers found that many initially skeptical child care providers soon became our biggest advocates.
- **Schedule volunteers at appropriate times.** After you and the child care providers have agreed on what the role of volunteers will be, make sure to schedule reading visits at times that make these objectives possible. Teachers sometimes think it is enough to simply bring volunteers *in* to the classroom, however one-on-one reading is often impossible if volunteer visits are scheduled during play, nap, or snack time.

Take Advantage of Your School's Resources

The greatest resources volunteer literacy groups have are the specialized strengths of their individual members. Don't be afraid to challenge your college or university to support your efforts. A number of schools, for example, are beginning to give academic credit for some volunteer activities and others are implementing public service focus programs within certain majors. In addition, many fraternities, sororities, and other groups might be interested in getting involved with community outreach programs.

- **Become a recognized student group.** Many benefits come from having the official recognition of your college or university, and most colleges do not allow the school name to be used unless this

recognition is granted. This process is usually a simple one and requires a list of members, a faculty advisor, and (occasionally) a written constitution. For more information contact your dean of students, who will probably also be able to offer additional resources.

- **Utilize faculty advisors.** Choose an advisor who has a sincere interest in what you are doing. HELP was lucky enough to have an incredible faculty member who was also the mother of a three-year-old. Tenured faculty members may have impressive credentials, but also be sure to consider assistant or junior professors who might be able to spend more time working and talking with you.
- **Establish a lending library.** Because many of the children we worked with had little or no access to new books, HELP is now working with other campus organizations to establish a lending library. Student volunteers will be able to borrow books from this on-campus resource in order to bring new reading materials to children in the community. Volunteers are encouraged to bring in books from home or donate others they might have enjoyed as children. When choosing books include selections with vivid illustrations, clearly defined text areas, and diverse cultural representation. Many government and non-profit organizations may also be interested in donating books. For more information on these groups consult the resource section at the end of this booklet.
- **Consider resource opportunities your school might offer.** The best resources are often under utilized: that incredible would-be advisor eager to get back in touch with undergraduate life, the never used meeting space over the financial aid office, the public service fund that people have all but forgotten. Be creative. Be determined. For information about where to look try contacting your college's public service dean, volunteer coordinator, or America Reads Challenge contact person. Information on the President's America Reads Challenge is available at the back of this booklet.

Training

When training volunteers remember that *all* children, including those with special needs, learn from the reading strategies discussed in this booklet. Also, many child care centers require volunteers to have certain vaccinations (which are usually required by colleges anyway) and complete a small amount of paperwork. This may seem tedious, but it often goes quickly—enabling you to get on to more important and meaningful things.

- **Ask the group you work with for advice about training.** Many child care groups or centers are interested in offering advice or assistance in training (usually free of charge). Be certain to include representatives from the group with whom you volunteer when planning the focus of training sessions. Ask if there are any unique cultural or community influences of which volunteers should be mindful.
- **Build on children's strengths.** Search for ways to expand or modify activities to maximize the benefits to specific children involved, including children with special needs. When working with a child who is easily distracted, for example, consider holding him or her close beside you as you read. If you have questions about how to best read with a particular child, ask child care providers for specific suggestions.
- **Provide on-going training and support.** HELP trained volunteers at a Saturday morning session lead by a Head Start education coordinator. Volunteer training, however, is an ongoing project because most questions come up after volunteers have worked with the children for a couple of weeks. When thinking about training consider working with other programs. Next year HELP, for example, will work in partnership with a graduate student reading specialist and will coordinate with other campus service groups to sponsor mid-year training workshops.

- **A word about liability.** Child care staff should always be aware of all interactions between volunteers and children. As a precaution, HELP volunteers only interact with children in situations where teachers or paid staff are present. This way, our volunteers can focus on reading. Behavior problems, should they arise, are handled by child care teachers or staff.

Take Advantage of Available Networks

HELP organizers spent an entire semester talking with early childhood teachers and visiting day care, play school, and Head Start classrooms before the first volunteer even signed up. While it may not take this long for you to find a classroom or set of classrooms that works for your group, realize that this "coalition building" is very important—many groups fail because they grow too big too quickly. HELP eventually chose Cambridge's Head Start program because these ten or so classrooms were already linked in many useful ways, making it easy for HELP to gradually expand from one classroom into others.

- **Maximize the resources of the group with whom you work.** Focus on the things the preschool or community has to offer, as opposed to what they lack. Working with a program like Head Start, for example, offers volunteers the advantage of resources like central administration and volunteer training programs; though they are by no means the only such network around.
- **Link up with other groups and programs in the community.** Many neighborhoods have established day care "associations" or "families" with resources similar to those of Head Start. To find out if such a group exists in your area try contacting your local Mayor's office, school board, or child care center. These groups and networks will likely be useful in volunteer training, though individual classroom teachers are often willing to offer advice and assistance in training as well. In addition, public libraries, shelters, hospitals, and a variety of other groups are often more than eager to have volunteers read with the children they serve.

- **Consider other resources your own school might offer.** Many colleges with large public service communities can often work together when training new volunteers or planning retreats. Two programs which are different can still work together. For more information, try contacting your college's public service dean, volunteer programming coordinator, or America Reads Challenge contact person.

Recruiting Volunteers

Recruiting volunteers is often one of the most rewarding aspects of this sort of work because it reminds current volunteers of all the things they love about the program—especially when they are passionate about what is being done. One of the very best ways to interest others is by allowing them to see the way in which this work has enriched your own life—not to mention the lives of the children with whom you have worked.

- **Don't depend completely on the written word.** Posters, fliers, and mass mailings might be effective at getting people to come to an introductory meeting, but they won't motivate volunteers to get out of bed an hour early to go to visit a day care center. Let's face it, you've probably thrown away a thousand of these "incredible" fliers already.
- **Be sincere in both your invitation and commitment.** HELP uses small, informal, introductory meetings as a way of bringing people "in" to the group. Pictures, displays, and—most importantly—active volunteers who are enthusiastic about sharing their experiences get potential volunteers excited and make them want to come back.
- **Be intimate.** When advertising your program you might consider keeping this personal tone in mind—people are far more likely to respond to a sincere, individual invitation than to a flier posted beside the locker room. Many people do this sort of service because,

in addition to wanting to help, they feel that this work will deepen and enrich their own lives. Don't forget that volunteers, just like the children with whom you work, benefit from this interaction.

Work With—Not Simply For—Communities

Possibly more than anything else, lessons learned during HELP's first year highlight the critical importance of working *with* teachers, families, and communities instead of trying to simply do things *for* them. Don't misunderstand: an individual volunteer reading for an hour a week with a child is wonderful—the benefits multiply, however, when that volunteer also begins to interact with the child's teachers, family members, and community. When starting a new program, look for ways to integrate your group into the already existing structure of the children's lives.

- **Learn about the children's lives.** Sensitivity, both cultural and otherwise, is essential in this type of work. Understanding the issues playing a part in a child's life—including those children with special needs—greatly increases your ability to make a difference. When training volunteers seek input from experienced people regarding what volunteers should keep in mind if they come in contact with situations of child abuse, neglect, or cultural differences.
- **Try something outside of your role as reading helper.** HELP volunteers often act as chaperons (along with parents) on class field trips, take part in classroom parties, community festivals, and volunteer at monthly parenting classes.
- **Consider family literacy.** Many other communities sponsor family literacy programs where children, parents, and volunteers interact with each other through reading. If your area doesn't have such a program it might not be too difficult to start—nearly all child care centers have family conference times that teachers might be eager to extend if only they had the necessary volunteer base. The Even Start Family Literacy Program (described in this booklet's "Resources" section) is such a program with projects nationwide.

- **Require consistency.** Many volunteers are astounded by young children's tremendous capacity to share, love, and trust. With this trust, however, comes a large degree of responsibility. If an individual wishes to volunteer, require her or him to sign a personal commitment form agreeing to be in the classroom each day required. Many children have been deeply hurt by volunteers who come to class for a few weeks and then disappear. Young children often have enough inconsistency in their lives as it is; well-meaning volunteer groups need not add more.
- **Don't underestimate the importance of celebration.** Celebration is important in both children's lives and in our own. At the conclusion of its first year HELP volunteers took part in Cambridge Head Start's annual "Picnic in the Park." At this day-long event children, teachers, parents, and volunteers all came together to reflect on, and celebrate, the events of the year—with everyone having something to contribute: children brought their artwork and made classroom T-shirts, parents brought food, teachers led games, volunteers did face painting, and local business groups set up a petting zoo. By bringing together all parts of the community—thus uniting all aspects of the children's lives—the event was a huge success.

Focus Your Efforts

Just as all children are different, each child care center has special strengths and diverse needs. By building on strengths and focusing on growth areas, volunteer groups can dramatically enhance a child's educational world. Specializing in family literacy is an excellent example of how some groups focus their work on individual community needs, though there are many other ways to do this as well.

- **English as a second language.** Head Start teachers in Cambridge, for example, cited mastering English as a second language as a major difficulty facing their early childhood population. In response, HELP targeted a considerable portion of its recruiting campaign on

students from foreign countries with an interest in public service. These students not only helped preschool children with English, but—because they had a great deal in common with the students with whom they worked—were able to relate to the children on a very personal level, making them excellent mentors as well.

- **Include children with special needs.** It is important to make the most out of the time you spend with each child. When working with a child with special needs, focus your efforts to capitalize on their individual strengths. For example, if a child has trouble paying attention don't feel obligated to "finish" the book. Instead, engage the child in conversation as you read. For example, ask creative questions about the story that require more than a yes or no response. If the child loses interest try drawing a picture or making up a song about what might happen next.
- **Recruit men.** The absence of male role models in the lives of many children was another issue that concerned teachers in Cambridge. HELP actively recruited men and, as a result, large numbers of male undergraduates turned out to volunteer, despite the fact that similar groups often have relatively few male volunteers. While any person interested in getting involved was more than encouraged, these efforts helped keep the needs of the community front and center in the minds of volunteers.

Keep the Dialogue Going

Even by the end of the first introduction meeting you will probably notice that people will hang around to talk, compare their experiences, and begin to become friends. People tend naturally to combine in this way, despite the fact that many organizations try to eliminate these "unproductive" times altogether. *Do not* make this mistake. Discussion about the future of your program and reflection on personal and shared experiences are absolutely critical for any healthy service group.

- **Incorporate weekly reflection sessions and make them mandatory.** Because of the importance HELP places on reflection, volunteers interested in the program agreed to attend a reflection session every two weeks. These have proved to be excellent forums for discussion and often included guest speakers or panel discussions, or both. Instead of feeling like a requirement, these meetings quickly became rewarding times for students to come together to discuss important, successful, or frustrating aspects of their work with fellow volunteers. In addition, these sessions served another purpose—people who had simply been strangers with similar interests quickly became advocates excited about both their cause and their friendships with each other.
- **Use the reflection sessions to talk about the future of the group.** Take advantage of the wealth of experience coming together during the reflection sessions and use the time to talk about critical issues and the future of the organization.

Finally, Establish a Firm Base From Which To Grow

While setting up the group requires the most energy, other things need to be considered after this is done. Most importantly, remember to keep enthusiasm and interest up—but don't worry if the first weeks are rocky. Volunteers are normally very excited by the first few encounters. After the initial visits, enthusiasm might lag for a brief period while people get adjusted, but it will rise again as volunteers and preschoolers begin to form true friendships. During this time, focus on strengthening the relationships within your organization and between your group and the larger community.

- **Evaluate your progress.** It is important to know what your efforts are accomplishing and how your program can improve. Take advantage of time at the end of the year to get feedback from teachers and parents. While form letters and evaluation sheets sometimes get the job done, many groups also consider

end-of-the-year discussion meetings with volunteers and teachers from different sites. This way teachers know their input is valued and interactive conversation often sparks new ideas for the future.

- **Be cautious when expanding.** Groups often expand before they are ready. HELP, for example, chose not to expand into surrounding neighborhoods during its first year because volunteers decided it was more important to grow "inwardly" at first—strengthening ties to the teachers, communities, and classrooms already being served. From this firm base, future expansion will be both easier and more successful.
- **Build "institutional memory."** Keep good records of what you do and who you work with during the first years of the program. Lists of helpful training leaders and interested contact people prove to be invaluable to future volunteers. Also, encourage young volunteers to continue their involvement in years to come.
- **Nurture new leaders.** No matter how much you love your program, graduation day will eventually come. While you're still in school take steps to ensure that there are students ready to lead the program after you leave. Start recruiting student leaders during their first years at college, and offer them chances to take on increasingly important projects. After its first year, HELP chose several assistant directors to manage different aspects of the program, such as administration, recruitment of volunteers, and community liaison. Because these students were all freshmen, they will each have the opportunity to develop their leadership styles as the program grows.

Without question, one of the most important things about this sort of project is the recruitment of new leaders. In addition, the distinction between working for and working with communities is also essential. By encouraging members to take an active role in both your organization and the larger community, your group will be better able to respond to the changing interests of everyone involved. Finally, starting early is crucial. Hopefully you will find younger undergraduates to run the program after you leave and, with any luck at all, maybe one day some of your preschoolers will take over for them. Best of luck.

Making Connections: How Children Learn

A Summary of Recent Brain Research

Many parents, child care providers, and volunteers have instinctively understood the importance of the language activities they share with children beginning in the first years of life. These activities are not limited to reading, but also include storytelling, singing, and ordinary exchanges that take place in the course of everyday life. Now, after more than 20 years of focused study, new brain research is confirming the merit of these activities. With the help of new brain imaging technologies, brain researchers are gaining insight on how and why these activities promote early development—not only intellectual growth, but healthy social and emotional development as well. On the basis of this research, many pediatricians place such value on the stimulation children receive when read to at a young age that they have begun to *prescribe* reading to babies along with regular check-ups and vaccinations.

The neuroscience associated with this research is complicated, but its lesson is simple: babies' brains develop at astonishing rates in the years after birth. Young children have a tremendous capacity to learn from the moment they are born, but optimal development hinges on the experiences provided for them by the adults who take care of them. Scientists have long believed that reading with children creates a context in which learning can occur. Today, however, they have evidence that reading is one of the experiences that actually influences the way young brains develop—that is, the way the brain's circuitry is "wired."[1]

But how does this work? At birth children have most of the brain cells, or neurons, they will need for a lifetime of learning, but these brain cells are not yet linked with the complex networks that are needed for mature thought processes to take place. In the early years, young children's brain cells form connection—synapses—very rapidly.

What causes brain cells to form connections? Genes control some of the process, but experience is also a crucial ingredient. Every time a caregiver or volunteer interacts with an infant or toddler, connections are formed. Positive interactions with nurturing caregivers—like the attention children receive when they are read to—profoundly stimulate young brains. This stimulation causes new connections to form neural pathways (we might think of as "learning pathways") and strengthens existing ones.

In the first years of life children form extra synapses. In fact, a three-year-old has twice as many connections as an adult. In the second decade of life, as children move toward adulthood, trillions of extra connections are eliminated. But this is not a random process. Those connections that have been used repeatedly in the early years have become stronger and tend to remain; those that have not been used often enough are shed.

In adolescence young people are losing connections or synapses at a rapid rate, and this may sound worrisome (especially as they approach the age when they begin to think about getting their drivers' licenses). But in fact, the process of shedding excess synapses is perfectly natural and, in fact, beneficial for the human brain. It is something like pruning plants in a crowded garden: the ones that remain can grow larger and stronger. By eliminating seldom-used pathways, the brain leaves room for sturdier, more efficient neural networks. The result is a brain whose "circuitry" is better organized and better suited for learning the more difficult concepts and skills that a young adult needs to master.

The pruning process is therefore critical to optimal brain development. It also explains why early experience is so crucial. Children whose neural pathways have been reinforced by a great deal of positive early experience—including a variety of language activities—will be better off when the brain's pruning process begins.

What Role Do Families and Communities Play?

As few as twenty years ago scientists believed that the genes we were born with wholly determined the structure of our brains. The facts recently discovered by neurologists and psychologists, however, prove that how children develop, learn, and grow depends on the critical and continual interplay between nature (or genetic endowment) and nurture (the surroundings, care, stimulation, and teachings received). And, according to Rima Shore and the Families and Work Institute, both of these influences are crucial.[2]

Rethinking the Brain[3]

OLD THINKING. . .	NEW THINKING. . .
How a brain develops depends on the genes you are born with.	How a brain develops hinges on complex interplay between the genes you're born with and the experiences you have.
The experiences you have at a very young age have little impact on later development.	Early experiences have a decisive impact on the architecture of the brain and the nature and extent of adult capacities.
A secure relationship with a primary caregiver creates a favorable context for early childhood development and learning.	Early interactions don't just create a context, they directly affect the way the brain is "wired."
Brain development is linear: the brain's capacity to learn and change grows steadily as an infant progresses toward adulthood.	Brain development is non-linear: there are prime times for acquiring different kinds of knowledge and skills.
A toddler's brain is much less active than the brain of a college student.	By the time children reach the age of three, their brains are twice as active as those of adults. Activity drops during adolescence.

Sharing books with children not only lays the groundwork for much of the language and critical thinking skills they will need later in life, it also helps prepare them for many of the emotional challenges all people

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eventually face. Children who have continual, healthy interactions with nurturing caregivers become better prepared—both emotionally and biologically—to deal with and learn from the stresses and disappointments of everyday life.[4]

Children seemingly placed at a disadvantage by "nature" offer dramatic proof of the brain's amazing capacity to compensate in a conducive environment. It is well documented, for example, that many children who lose language due to a stroke at a young age often recover the ability to speak because the young inventive brain is able to shift this function to another area. Even in cases of epilepsy, where it is sometimes necessary to remove an entire side of the brain, the remaining half often begins to work overtime—taking on many of the duties of the lost hemisphere.[5] According to UCLA pediatric neurologist Dr. Donald Shields, "if there's a way to compensate, the developing brain will find it.[6]

Take the example of Brandi Binder, a 13-year-old living in Colorado Springs, who developed severe epilepsy at the age of six and had to have the entire right side of one portion of her brain removed. Afterwards she lost all control of muscles on the left side of her body, the side controlled by the right side of her brain. However today, after years of therapy and hard work, she is an A student and excels at math, art, and music—skills usually governed by the right side of the brain. While her recovery has not been 100 percent complete (she has not yet regained use of her left arm) it comes very close and, more than that, it demonstrates the adaptive powers of the early childhood brain. For this and other reasons, the debate that has long engaged philosophers—whether nature or nurture dominates development—no longer perplexes scientists. "It's not a competition," says Dr. Stanley Greenspan, a psychiatrist at George Washington University. "It's a dance."[7]

The key, then, is for families, teachers, and communities to work together and start reading to children early. According to Dr. Reid Lyon, Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch at the National Institutes of Health, most conventional intervention efforts

(which begin after the third grade) begin too late. Not that these children are beyond help, by any means, but Lyon's research shows that reading efforts are much more effective the earlier they are implemented. According to his research a 12 year-old child will need between four and five times more "intervention time" than a 5-year-old child with similar reading problems.

Children in Poverty

In America today at least one in four children under the age of six is growing up in poverty. Poverty can certainly affect the kind of environment in which young children grow, and the early experiences they have. It has an impact on the kind of nutrition expectant mothers and their children receive, their access to medical care, and the safety and predictability of the physical environment. It can also affect the stress levels experienced by parents and other caregivers. Finally, children who grow up in poverty are more likely to be exposed to drugs and alcohol (before they are born, and in their homes after birth), as well as violence and abuse. None of these conditions is limited to economically disadvantaged children, but they are more likely to occur.

Research by Alan Sroufe and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota have established that children growing up in poverty are more prone to developmental delays and learning difficulties than other children. Today, new insights into the brain are helping to explain this phenomenon. It is now known that early experiences (both positive and negative) can have a decisive impact on early brain development. Poverty influences these early experiences. Epidemiological surveys, for example, confirm that the risk of poor school readiness and reading problems are highest among families of the lowest socio-economic status.[8]

But as the Families and Work Institute demonstrated in their recent study, risk is not destiny. A number of children (including those in the study by Sroufe and his colleagues) have exhibited remarkable resilience. Many factors appear to affect children's capacity to thrive in

circumstances where others do not, but strong, secure relationships with consistent caregivers appear to be the most important. Research suggests that these secure, warm relationships have a protective effect, helping to buffer children from later stress. By the same token, children who are deprived of such relationships early in life are especially vulnerable to stress as they move through childhood, and may experience developmental delays.

Why Young Children Need Your Help

Research proves the first years of life are crucial to a child's development. In reality, these are the years children receive the least attention from the educational world. Many young children are in child care programs with staff who are underpaid, lack training in early childhood and brain development, and may be responsible for too many children.[9]

Well publicized findings by the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team, for example, found "most child care settings are of mediocre to poor quality" and the nation's youngest children are the "most likely to be in unsafe, substandard care." Furthermore, the care given to one third of our country's children is not only less-than-optimal, but in fact *detrimental* to their development.[10]

Things, however, *are* being done and many of these children are being systematically helped by thousands of individuals and groups in public and private child care organizations, preschool, Head Start, Early Head Start, and Even Start family literacy centers all over the country. When choosing a classroom or set of classrooms, you will likely be faced with many different options depending on the community in which you live. The pages that follow offer information on a number of resources which may be of use.

Notes

1. Rima Shore, *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development.* Families and Work Institute, 1997, ix.
2. Shore, x.
3. Chart from Shore, 18.
4. ibid.
5. Shore, 36
6. Nash, Madeline. "Fertile Minds." *Time*, February 3, 1997, 54.
7. Nash, 52.
8. Shore, 48.
9. Newberger, Julee. "New Brain Development Research—A Wonderful Window of Opportunity to Build Public Support for Early Childhood Education!" *Young Children Magazine*, 52:4, 8.
10. Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team. 1995. *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers.* Denver, CO: Department of Economics, University of Colorado at Denver.

Resources

The Head Start Program

Head Start, launched as an eight-week summer program in 1965, was designed to break the cycle of poverty by providing preschool children of low-income families with a comprehensive program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs. Currently run by the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start now serves over 751,000 children and their families each year in urban and rural areas of all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Territories.

There are currently four components of Head Start:

- **Education**—Head Start's educational program is designed to meet each child's individual needs, with attention to the community's ethnic and cultural characteristics. Every child also receives a variety of learning experiences to foster intellectual, social, and emotional growth. Children are encouraged to express their feelings and to get along well with others. Head Start offers low child-staff ratios and gives staff members training in child development, early childhood education, and in working with disabled children.
- **Health**—Head Start emphasizes the importance of early identification of health problems and arranges for every child to receive, if needed, comprehensive health care including medical, dental, mental health, and nutritional services.
- **Parent Involvement**—Parents are the most important influences on a child's development. An essential part of every Head Start program is the involvement of parents in parent education, program planning, and other operating activities. Many parents also serve as Head Start volunteers and are given preference for employment in Head Start jobs for which they are qualified.

- **Social Services**—This component represents an organized method of assisting families to assess their needs, and then providing those services that will build on each family's individual strengths. Some of these activities are: community outreach, referrals, community resource information, emergency assistance, and crisis intervention.

For more information about volunteer opportunities contact the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families at the Health and Human Services regional office nearest you:

CT, MA, ME, RI, VT call (617) 565–2482

NJ, NY, PR, VI call (212) 264–2974

DC, DE, MD, PA, VA, WV call (215) 596–1224

AR, LA, NM, OK, TX call (214) 767-9648

AL, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, SC, TN call (404) 331–2398

IA, KS, MO, NE call (816) 426–5401

IL, IN, MI, MN, OH, WI call (312) 353–8322

CO, MT, ND, SD, UT, WY call (303) 844–3106

AZ, CA, HI, NV, Pacific Insular Areas call (415) 556–7408

AK, ID, OR, WA call (206) 615–2557

The Even Start Program

The purpose of Even Start is to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving the educational opportunities of the nation's low-income families through the integration of early childhood education, adult literacy, including adult basic education or English as a second language, and parenting education into a unified family literacy program. Even Start is implemented through cooperative projects that build on existing community resources to create a new range of services designed to help families become full partners in the education of young children.

While smaller than Head Start, Even Start greatly appreciates student volunteers. For more information on Even Start family literacy programs in your area, get in touch with your state Department of Education or contact Patricia McKee at the U.S. Department of Education. She can be reached at (202) 260-0991.

The America Reads Challenge

The America Reads Challenge is an initiative that calls on all Americans—parents, educators, librarians, religious leaders, university officials, college students, members of the media, community activists, business leaders, and senior citizens—to support teachers and help ensure that every American child can read well and independently by the end of the third grade. The America Reads Challenge builds on groundwork being laid by classroom teachers, librarians and reading specialists by drawing upon the invigorating spirit of community volunteers in tutoring and mentoring. One way the America Reads Challenge operates is through Federal Work Study expansion. To fulfill his challenge, President Clinton has proposed that 100,000 Federal Work-Study (FWS) students serve as reading tutors. To help institutions with this initiative, the Secretary of Education has waived the employer matching requirement for FWS students tutoring pre-school and elementary school children.

Other features of the Federal Work Study portion of the America Reads Challenge include:

- **Reach One Million Federal Work Study (FWS) Participants:** In 1996, FWS funding was $617 million and went to 713,000 students. In 1997, FWS received a 35 percent increase and will reach some 945,000 students—a major step toward the President's State of the Union promise of 1 million students earning their way through college under the FWS program by the year 2000. The 1997 appropriation is the largest annual dollar increase in the history of the FWS program.

- **Opportunities in Community Service:** This increase opens up significant opportunities for participating institutions to employ more of their students in community service jobs. The Secretary encourages institutions to use a portion of their fiscal year 1997 FWS increase for community service. (Existing regulations require institutions to use at least 5 percent of their total FWS allocation for community service).
- **America Reads Commitment:** Institutions that wish to participate in the America Reads Challenge are asked to commit a significant number of their new FWS positions for 1997–98 as reading tutors. As of August 1, more than 630 colleges and universities have joined this initiative.
- **Waiver in Matching Requirements for Reading Tutors:** Generally, the federal government provides up to 75 percent of FWS wages, while employers contribute at least a 25 percent match. Effective for the 1997–98 award year, the Secretary has waived the matching requirement for students serving as reading tutors to preschool and elementary school children. This 100 percent federal funding of FWS reading tutors facilitates the participation of postsecondary institutions in the America Reads Challenge.

For more information contact the America Reads Challenge at **1-800-USA-LEARN** or visit their homepage at http://www.ed.gov/inits/americareads/

Additional Information

More Literacy Groups or College-Based Programs

Program: Harvard Emerging Literacy Project (HELP)

Contact: Chandler Arnold, Founder

Description: HELP started with a few students' promise to read with a group of preschoolers once a month and currently places weekly and biweekly reading volunteers in every Head Start Classroom in Cambridge, MA. Still very much of a grassroots effort, volunteers tailor individual arrangements to suit the needs of their partner-teachers and their classrooms. Emerging literacy, English as a second language, and confidence building are nurtured during one-on-one reading times and activities. All volunteers also attend weekly reflection sessions to discuss their experiences and are encouraged to participate in supervised preschool and family/community gatherings.

For More Information: Harvard Emerging Literacy Project
Harvard College
University Hall Room 4
Cambridge, MA 02138

Program: National Literacy Hotline

Description: This bilingual hotline is the only toll-free nationwide literacy information and referral service in the United States. It strives to link people, one-by-one, to literacy programs in their own communities. To provide these referrals, a database of over 10,000 literacy programs across the United States is updated continually. The hotline/information clearinghouse also provides free brochures and fact sheets on literacy topics ranging from individual children's learning to international literacy programs.

For more information: Call 1–800–223–8813

Program: Jumpstart

Contact: Aaron Lieberman, Founder

Description: Jumpstart, founded in 1993 by students at Yale University, brings together Americorps Members and college volunteers to work one-on-one with the same preschool child over a two-year period. Jumpstart operates in Head Start and child-care programs in low-income communities in Boston, New Haven, New York and Washington, DC. Volunteers serve two hours, two afternoons a week and full time in the summer. Families are also involved in classroom activities and are encouraged to create home literacy environments.

For more information contact:

93 Summer Street
Boston, MA 02110
1–617–542–JUMP
http://www.jstart.org

Program: Reading Is Fundamental, Inc.

Description: Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) is the nation's oldest and largest nonprofit children's literacy organization that has worked with local groups since 1966. RIF motivates youngsters to want to read by letting them choose and keep books they like and by showing them that reading is fun and important. The program works effectively for youngsters of any age (including children preschools, Head Start settings, and child care centers) and is designed to suit the needs of children from all backgrounds. RIF's national network provides technical assistance, book discounts, as well as ideas and information.

For more information contact:

Reading Is Fundamental, Inc
Programs Division
600 Maryland Avenue, SW, Suite 600
Washington, D.C. 20024–2569
1–202–287–3220

Program: First Book

Contact: Bradley R. Pine, Executive Director

Description: First Book, a nationwide nonprofit organization, gives disadvantaged children the opportunity to read and own their first new book. First Book works with existing community-based family-literacy, tutoring, and mentor programs to distribute new books to children who are at risk of failing at school or developing inadequate literacy skills. First Book targets children and families who, for economic or other reasons, have little or no access to books outside school. Through its book distributions, it encourages children to develop the self-confidence that owning a book can bring.

For more information contact:

First Book
1133 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
1-202-393-1222

Other Early Childhood Literacy Materials

Title:	*Ready to Read: Preschool Program Manual*
Type:	Manual explaining how to implement the Ready to Read incentive-based read-a-thon.
Focus:	Family literacy and early preschool reading
Published by:	Department of Education F.I.R.S.T.
Project Date:	1994
Summary:	This manual offers information for preschool caregivers interested in taking part in the Ready to Read reading program. Packet contains extensive information on all aspects of the program including directions, record keeping, bulletin boards, awards, parent letters, and success strategies.
For more information:	Solano Beach School District 309 North Rios Avenue Solano Beach, CA 92075 1-619-755-6319

Title:	*America Reads Challenge: Ready*Set*Read for Caregivers*
Type:	Booklet
Focus:	Language, Emergent Literacy
Published by:	Corporation for National Service, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Principle author:	Derry Koralek
Summary:	Booklet is filled with activities and ideas caregivers can use every day to help young children learn about language. Caregivers are given suggestions as to how they can work with families to support and build on the language skills children learn at home. Activities are presented for four age groups: young babies, crawlers and walkers, toddlers, and preschoolers.
For more information:	This and many other publications are available on the Department of Education's internet web site at http://www.ed.gov

Title:	*America Reads Challenge: Ready*Set*Read for Families*
Type:	Booklet
Focus:	Language, Emergent Literacy
Published by:	Corporation for National Service, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Principle author:	Derry Koralek
Summary:	Booklet is filled with activities and ideas families can use every day to help young children learn about language. Families are given suggestions as to how they can work with caregivers to support and build on the language skills children learn at home. Activities are presented for four age groups: young babies, crawlers and walkers, toddlers, and preschoolers.
For more information:	This and many other publications are available on the Department of Education's internet web site at http://www.ed.gov

Title:	*Read*Write*Now: Just Add Kids*
Type:	Resource Directory
Focus:	Children and Family Literacy
Published by:	U.S. Department of Education
Date:	1996
Summary:	Just Add Kids is an excellent resource directory of learning partners, reading sites, and other literacy services for families and communities who want to help their children improve their reading and writing skills through READ*WRITE*NOW and other literacy efforts. Also provides the names of national organizations that have volunteer learning partners at the local level, suggests potential sites for tutoring, and provides information on national literacy organizations.
For more information:	Call 1-800-USA-LEARN

Title:	*Learning To Read, Reading To Learn: Helping Children With Learning Disabilities To Succeed*
Type:	Information Kit
Focus:	Children with special needs
Published by:	U.S. Department of Education
Date:	1996
Summary:	Learning To Read, Reading To Learn offers a number of good resources for individuals working with children with special needs including sections offering tips for families, teachers, and principals. The 1996-7 Resource guide might be particularly useful for students working with early childhood groups.
For more information:	Contact the Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs 1–202–205–5465

Title:	*Grassroots Success! Preparing Families and Schools for Each Other*
Type:	Booklet
Focus:	Community Involvement
Author:	Valora Washington, Valorie Johnson, Janet Brown McCracken
Published by:	W.K. Kellog Foundation and the National Association for the Education of Young Children
Date:	1995
Summary:	Contains compelling evidence of grassroots success in preparing schools and families for each other—gleaned from the achievements of the 20 diverse W.K. Kellog Foundation School Readiness Initiatives. Focuses on ways in which grassroots community groups can work with schools and families to improve children's health, nutrition, family and community stability, cultural competence, self esteem, and quality of early learning experiences.
For more information:	National Association for the Education of Young Children 1509 16th Street, N.W. Washington, DC 20036-1426

Title:	*Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development*
Type:	Book
Focus:	Early Development and Learning
Author:	Rima Shore
Published by:	Families and Work Institute
Date:	1997
Summary:	Rethinking the Brain, and the conference which inspired it, presents an overview of neuroscientists' recent findings about the brain and suggests how these insights can guide and support our nation's efforts to promote the healthy development of young children. An excellent and thorough document in common-sense language. Executive summary also available.
For more information:	Families and Work Institute 330 Seventh Avenue New York, NY 10001 1-212-465-2044

Title:	*Helping Your Child Learn To Read: Activities for Children Birth-10*
Type:	Booklet
Focus:	Family Literacy
Author:	Bernice Cullinan and Brod Bagert
Published by:	U.S. Department of Education/OERI
Date:	1993
Summary:	One in a series of books on education topics designed for family use. A fun book, this one provides a short run-down on facts, but the biggest part is made up of activities children and families can do together.

Internet Resources

There are a number of early childhood education discussion groups (called listserves) available on the internet. You can join a free listserve by subscribing. To subscribe, send an email message to: listserv*@address*. Leave the subject line blank. In the body of the message, write: subscribe *listservename yourfirstname yourlastname* or subscribe *listname youremailaddress*. For early childhood information consider subscribing to:

- ECENET-L@vmd.cso.uiuc.edu (early childhood education)
- EDNET@nic.umass.edu (internet use in education)
- EDPOLYAN@asuvm.inre.asu.edu (education policy)

There are also a number of web sites designed for individuals interested in early childhood issues, a number of which are listed below. Finally, if you need information about an education topic and are unable to find it on the Internet, you can send an electronic email message, containing your request for information and describing the topic you are interested in, to: **askeric@ericir.syr.edu**

- **America Reads Challenge**
  http://www.ed.gov/inits/americareads/
- **Children's Defense Fund**
  http://www/tmn.com/cdf/index.html
- **Children's Literature Web Guide**
  http://ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/index.html
- **Early Childhood Education On Line**
  http://www.ume.maine.edu/~coefed/eceol/welcome.html
- **Early Childhood Education**
  http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/ericeece.html
- **The Keeping Kids Reading Page**
  http://www.tiac.net/users/maryl/

- **National Coalition for Campus Child Care**
  http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/N4c/N4chome.html
- **Reading, English, and Communication**
  http://www.indiana.edu/~eric/eric.html
- **National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education**
  http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECIindex.html
- **National Association for the Education of Young Children**
  http://www.naeyc.org/naeyc
- **U.S. Department of Education**
  http://www.ed.gov

Check List

Getting Started: Have you?

- ✓ Talked informally with friends or contacts in nearby child care centers?
- ✓ Taken care not to overwhelm classroom teachers?
- ✓ Stressed to child care providers that you don't have all the answers?
- ✓ Demonstrated that your interest is sincere?
- ✓ Become a recognized student group and taken advantage of faculty advisors?
- ✓ Considered resource opportunities outside of your college or university?
- ✓ Scheduled volunteer visits at times that are conducive to reading?

Training: Have you?

- ✓ Stressed to volunteers that reading strategies apply to all children?
- ✓ Designed practices that build on the strengths of children with special needs?
- ✓ Asked the centers with whom you work for input regarding reading training?
- ✓ Made sure that volunteers have necessary shots and have completed appropriate paperwork?
- ✓ Implemented plans for ongoing training and volunteer support?
- ✓ Required a consistent commitment from volunteers?

Building Links: Have you?

- ✓ Considered what resources your school might offer?
- ✓ Connected with other groups and programs in the community?
- ✓ Built on the strengths of the community as you work together?

Recruiting Volunteers: Have you?

- ✓ Considered other options besides posters and fliers?
- ✓ Shared your personal experiences with pro spective volunteers?
- ✓ Required consistency and a genuine commitment from volunteers?

Working With—Not Simply For—Communities: Have you?

- ✓ Learned about the life-situations of the children you work with?
- ✓ Tried things outside your "role" as reading helper?
- ✓ Considered family literacy?
- ✓ Celebrated the successes of your program and the children involved?

Focusing Your Efforts: Have you?

- ✓ Developed skills in using English as a second language?
- ✓ Focused activities based on the needs of the community or classroom?
- ✓ Recruited men?
- ✓ Included children with special needs?

Keep the Dialogue Going: Have you?

- ✓ Evaluated your progress?
- ✓ Been cautious when expanding?
- ✓ Built "institutional memory?"
- ✓ Nurtured new leaders?

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Ordering Information

For copies of this booklet, contact the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education at the U.S. Department of Education; 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW; Washington, DC 20208, or call 1–202–219–1935.

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